

PURPLE PEOPLE EATER WORDS

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Peter Newby's November 1995 Word Ways article "The Anglo-American Hyphen" arrived in the same mail with the 2 Dec 1995 issue of Science News. In the Biology column of the latter (page 178), this headline appeared: A TREATMENT PLANT-FISH HATCHERY IN ONE -- reminiscent, perhaps, of a medical facility for plant-fish. But since Providence has provided two symbols to clarify such ambiguities, the following is better: A TREATMENT-PLANT/FISH-HATCHERY IN ONE. With loyal fealty, the article followed the style of its title. It began with a 21-word/single-sentence paragraph, almost half of which was a 10-word name: East Chicago Sanitary District Wastewater Treatment Plant near Lake Michigan.

About 15 years ago I stumbled onto an even more astonishing example of hyphen abuse. It so affected me that I began collecting such constructs, loosely categorizing them as Purple People Eater Words. The example appeared in a prestigious science magazine and concerned eastern California's geological anomaly, Mono Lake. I don't remember the actual name used in the title, but its spirit was SOUTH EAST RED RIDGE-TORTILLA FLAT NORTH MONO LAKE SURVEY. I tried several syntactical constructions but none had quite the pizzazz of a Ridge-Tortilla. I leave as an exercise for the reader the proper deployment of slashes and dashes.

Hyphen abuse often results from adjective-stringing, illustrated by various friends of the mythical Dr. Forth (named after the Firth of Forth): Stanley, the seven-foot flagpole sitter; Sylvia, the black seashell miner; bucolic Millicent, the brown-haired goat patter; and that great shy fan-eared varmint Buck, the cross-eyed lion tamer. This introduces a game that I and a friend, Scott Hancock, indulge-in over rum-and-cokes from time-to-time: the invention of names for more of Forth's ambiguous friends. Forth has now acquired quite a circle -- somewhere near the population of downtown Bowie, Arizona.

We also collect commercial examples. Our mental jury is still out on DEEP PAN PIZZA. If this is deep pan-pizza, do they also make, say, deep kettle-pizza, perhaps? And what is a deep pizza, anyway? A deep question.

The front-runner in commercial-class Purple People Eater words came about in the following way. For a period of time I listened to the radio (KTSM, 1380 on your AM dial) during a 50-mile drive across our alto plano, the desert, at dawn. A commercial read in a deep monotone voice (surely that of the owner) promoted an automobile dealership. Every

morning he exhorted the public to buy a car from him because of his LOW VOLUME PRICES. (There was a distinct hesitation after the word volume.) I tend to tune-out commercials, so it took several days to actually hear this one. Then I was impatient for it to be broadcast each morning; it took me a week to convince myself that I truly heard what I was hearing. I never grew tired of that commercial; I was disappointed when it ceased. I wondered mildly if I should call them about it. Was it deliberate or fortuitous? The jury is still out on this one also.

Hyphen omissions can also be abusive: I agree with Peter Newby's godawfuls. A COWORKER should be something that orks cows, and I wonder if our grandchildren will say REENTER? Peter didn't mention the worst one, COOPERATE. I can't shake the feeling, dating back to my teenager days on my grandmother's farm, that this is what her chickens did instead of laying. But the Queen's English, as spoken in England, deletes hyphens right along with the rest of the world: British author Anthony Oliver cheerfully uses REEQUIP on page 84 of *The Property of a Lady*.

Purple People-Eater words (or should that be Purple-People/Eater words?) will march-on in lockstep with time. Even as I write this (March 1996), I am peering into the future via the time-machine of the May 1996 issue of Dr. Dobb's Journal. Robert Collins, discussing Intel Corporation's suppression "...of some new, advanced programming features" for the Pentium computer chip, refers to Intel's PENTIUM FAMILY USER'S MANUAL. Now, Pentium Family-User's Manual sounds downright homey, but Pentium-Family User's Manual is quite different -- much more stark. (Intel, as attested by the article, meant the latter.)

The moral of this? The examples given here have shown that the dash is useful for connecting words to create a new word partaking of characteristics of the connectees. The lack of a dash can create a result varying from risible to indigestible. When two or more such compound terms are to be related, catenating them using a slash might clarify an otherwise tortuous construction.